

Written Testimony of Linda Ross
Christian Science Committee on Publication for Connecticut
before the Joint Committee on Public Health
Public Hearing on 2/16/21 - HB 6423 & SB 568

Dear Chair Abrams, Chair Steinberg and members of the Joint Committee on Public Health,

As the designated representative of Christian Science in the state of Connecticut, please accept this written testimony concerning HB 6423 and SB 568 relating to proposed repeal of the existing religious exemption from vaccination requirements.

Christian Scientists have deep respect for the lawmakers and public officials who work tirelessly to keep our communities healthy and safe. We are often associated with use of the religious exemption to vaccination, and in our commitment to following the law regarding contagion and vaccination requirements, we appreciate the availability of exemptions in Connecticut law as well as in the vast majority of states. Although commonly referenced as “exemptions,” Christian Scientists are more inclined to utilize these provisions in law as “religious accommodations” which afford them the space to contribute to the public health and welfare through their religious practice. Christian Scientists don’t view vaccination as something to fear or get out of, but generally prefer the greater sense of health, protection and well-being they find through their Bible-based religious practice that is premised upon the teachings of Christ Jesus.

Health care decisions for Christian Scientists, including those relating to contagion and vaccination, are not dictated by the Christian Science church. Rather, such decisions are motivated by each individual’s experience with their practice of Christian Science. When it comes to contagion, the emphasis of this practice is preventative and while we don’t claim to be perfect in our practice, we find it to be a very practical and reliable method of addressing these issues.

Periodicals published by the Christian Science church dating back to its inception in the late 1800’s include tens of thousands of accounts of protection and, in those instances where symptoms from contagion do take hold, healing through the practice of Christian Science, many of which have been medically verified. A common thread through these healings is the willingness to work with health authorities and take precautions to ensure they are not endangering others through their practice. The healing experiences of Connecticut citizens is well represented in these publications, and provide just a glimmer of the many more unpublished accounts of prevention and healing that members have experienced in their lives. For example, a 1933 report by a Hartford woman describes her medical diagnosis and quarantine for a severe case of scarlet fever, for which there still is no vaccine today. The health officer who subsequently pronounced her “perfectly healed,” expressed surprise at being summoned so quickly to release her from the quarantine, commenting that “the healing was remarkably quick considering the symptoms at first apparent.” (*Christian Science Sentinel*, March 25, 1933). Another example published more recently involved a college student from Norwalk who shared his quick healing from symptoms of chickenpox, and his compliance with

quarantine procedures prior to being released by the county health department. (*The Christian Science Journal*, April 2019).

We are concerned that the proposed bills exceed what is needed to achieve and maintain desired herd immunity levels for each of the diseases for which vaccination is required in Connecticut. The latest data from the Connecticut Department of Public Health (<https://portal.ct.gov/DPH/Immunizations/School-Survey>) illustrates that vaccination rates in Connecticut not only are within herd immunity levels, but have recently improved and are consistent with other states, nearly all of which have provided religious based exemptions to vaccination requirements for decades.

We recognize concerns exist with vaccination rates at particular schools. Rather than sacrifice legitimate fundamental religious interests across the state to address these pockets of concern, it seems more intuitive to look towards localized solutions that are more narrowly tailored to address the specific needs. Whether that involves limiting the availability of the exemption where the herd immunity for a particular disease is not being met, as Washington state did in 2019 to address concerns with MMR vaccination rates, or limiting the exemptions for schools that fail to achieve these rates, less invasive approaches will go further towards addressing the needs and interests that are part of the fabric of our state without forcing medical requirements that unnecessarily curtail religious rights and freedoms.

Given the numerous ways to address public health concerns with a more narrowly tailored approach, we encourage members of the committee to reconsider proposals that would eradicate Connecticut's long standing religious exemption.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Ross
Christian Science Committee on Publication for Connecticut